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SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S ELECAME: VIEWS FROM THE EU,
COMMONWEALTH, OTHER CHIEFS OF MISSION

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11. (SBU) Summary: On January 8, Ambassador hosted a meeting of the "8 6", an informal group of resident Chiefs of Mission which meets periodically. The group discussed the implications and possible responses to President Biya's recent creation of a new Electoral Commission (ELECAME) packed with ruling party stalwarts. They agreed that ELECAME lacks credibility but there were different views on whether to engage with it (despite its flaws) or take a strong stance. The Canadian High Commissioner thought the Commonwealth would take a strong stance against ELECAME. The EU faces a decision in the next month of whether to fund ELECAME in 2010. As an agreed next step, on January 15 the Ambassador and British High Commissioner will demarche the Prime Minister on ELECAME, on behalf of the 8 6, the Commonwealth and the European Union. On January 13, local media was abuzz with what turned out to be inaccurate reports of a Commonwealth statement critical of ELECAME - indicative of the public desire for some kind of international response. End summary.

The 8 6 and ELECAME

12. (U) The U.S. has the rotating chairmanship of the "8 6" from January-June, 2009. Members of the "8 6" include the Chiefs of Mission from the European Commission, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Japan, United States, Canada the UN, World Bank and IMF. The January 8 meeting was attended by the Chiefs of Mission (or Charges) from the EU, France, Germany, UK, Greece, Italy, UN and World Bank.

13. (U) The only agenda item was Cameroon's recently named Electoral Commission, Elections Cameroon (ELECAME). As reported reftel, President Paul Biya created ELECAME on December 30, two years after it was required under a 2006 law. The membership of this new organization, most of whose 12 members have strong ties to the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party, has been highly controversial. Critics in the media and civil society have pointed to the lack of diversity or independence in the membership of ELECAME, questioning its legality and its ability to run credible elections in 2011 (presidential) and 2012 (parliamentary and municipal).

Views from the Missions

14. (SBU) The participating Heads of Mission had the following thoughts:

Canada: The Canadian High Commissioner said there was not yet an official Commonwealth reaction to ELECAM but he saw the new Commonwealth Secretary General as more assertive than his predecessor, frustrated with Cameroon, and likely to have a strong negative reaction to the ELECAM announcement. The High Commissioner had contacted a representative of the Francophonie, who was not aware of ELECAM and, when informed about it, did not seem inclined to respond to the issue.

The ELECAM decision put the international community in a "Catch-22 situation," in that they either support ELECAM (which would be interpreted as acceptance) or they don't (which would doom it to failure), the High Commissioner said. He explained that Canada had sponsored Cameroon's membership in the Commonwealth in 1994 on the condition that it ascribe to the Harare Declaration which commits members to free and democratic political processes, including in Cameroon's case the creation of an independent electoral body. ELECAM does not separate the functions of an election supervisor and implementer (as is done in Canada and the UK), raising serious doubts about its credibility, he said, concluding that the EU and Commonwealth should be the first to respond on ELECAM, preferably jointly and quickly.

UN: ELECAM "affects everything we do here," according to the Acting UN Resident Coordinator. The UN has committed to supporting ELECAM and electoral processes through its 2008-2012 partnership agreement with the Government of

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Cameroon (GRC). The support is in the preparatory stage of identifying the needs of ELECAM. The Acting Res Rep concurred that the membership of ELECAM was not balanced or independent and noted that the UN was reviewing what to do with its agreement. She saw reformist "pockets of influence" within the GRC and argued that it was important to stay engaged with ELECAM, especially through technical support, in order to help shape it into something credible. Keeping ELECAM credible was key to long term stability during and after an election, she stated.

France: The French Ambassador had spoken to ELECAM Vice President Justin Ewodo Ebanga, who argued the need to look at the quality of the nominees to ELECAM, not just their party affiliation, and to evaluate ELECAM's organizational ability as it gets off the ground. The Francophonie seemed to be in a cautious wait-and-see mode, he said. The Ambassador felt there had been too much focus on the individuals in ELECAM and not enough on the institution, but conceded that "if the people aren't serious, it won't work." He argued for a two-track approach with the GRC: discussion through the regular EU-GRC dialogue, and a letter from the 8 6 "to go on record," or a meeting with the Prime Minister. (He added that the Organization National des Elections (ONEL), ELECAM's predecessor, was created in 2001 under pressure from the Francophonie.)

Germany: The German Ambassador argued for a measured approach to ELECAM, judging it on what it does and calibrating donor funding accordingly. Germany has "very difficult" relations with the GRC, which can increasingly go it alone and appears to care less and less about foreign reactions.

EU: The EU rep described the ELECAM decision as in a "very flagrant situation" which was difficult to justify. He noted that the EU had to decide by February 2009 whether to go ahead with a planned 2-3 million Euro program of support for ELECAM in 2010.

World Bank: The World Bank Res Rep affirmed that the GRC has the funds and could fund ELECAM adequately but appears not to be making it a priority. While ELECAM is outside the mandate

of the Bank, the ELECAM decision "speaks volumes about the government's commitment to reform" in all realms, including economic reform. The GRC listens to the international community much less than it did even a year ago, she said, although the government wants foreign recognition of ELECAM for domestic purposes. If the 8 6 criticizes ELECAM, it would be domestically difficult for the GRC, she said.

Italy: The Italian Ambassador thought the 8 6 should let the Commonwealth and EU take the lead in responding. He lamented that the GRC doesn't care as much as it used to about foreign pressure and argued that, while disappointed, the international community now needed to focus on making ELECAM work, even with its flaws.

UK: UK Charge agreed with the need to express disappointment with the ELECAM decision but was concerned that any pressure to change the composition of ELECAM at this point could give the GRC an excuse for delaying the establishment of a functioning electoral body.

Greece: The Greek Ambassador questioned whether the international community should continue to trust the government following the ELECAM decision.

Next Steps

15. (SBU) Ambassador Garvey argued that the longer we wait to react to ELECAM the more the GRC will interpret it as our acceptance. The GRC wants the legitimacy of an electoral process the international community recognizes, she argued, suggesting the group at least press for benchmarks to monitor the progress of ELECAM. We want to make sure the international response to ELECAM is used to leverage better elections in 2011, she said.

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16. (SBU) The Ambassador proposed, and the 8 6 group endorsed, that she meet soon with Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni as the rep for the 8 6, accompanied by the Charge of the British High Commission (representing the Commonwealth and the EU), to express disappointment with ELECAM and to point to the need for ELECAM to demonstrate it can function with independence. (Note: The PM is the designated interlocutor for the 8 6. End note). This meeting is scheduled for January 15.

The Statement That Wasn't

17. (U) The private Cameroonian press buzzed on January 13 with news of a statement from the Commonwealth condemning the composition of ELECAM and promising to withhold assistance on elections and decentralization programs until new ELECAM leadership is named. Our contacts at the British High Commission have confirmed these reports to be inaccurate. It appears the Cameroonian press seized on remarks critical of ELECAM made on January 12 by a member of the British Parliament and conflated his remarks into EU and Commonwealth policy. The EU Ambassadors are meeting in Yaounde on January 13 to discuss a common position, and the Commonwealth is not expected to make a comment until after a technical visit to Cameroon scheduled for the end of January.

Comment

18. (SBU) The ELECAM issue has dominated the local press for the past week, with media and civil society opinions heavily critical. Many of our contacts hope the USG and other foreign partners will openly discredit ELECAM. The headline attention given to the Commonwealth statement-that-wasn't reflects the keen public interest in the reaction of the donor community. The President's decision on ELECAM is a

serious step backward for democracy in Cameroon, raising questions about future elections and Biya's longer term plans that we will analyze in greater depth septel. Our reaction to ELECAM will shape our relationship with the GRC as well as our reputation with the Cameroonian public. We will weigh the Commonwealth and EU positions on ELECAM and the outcome of our upcoming meeting with the PM in coordinating with the Department on a USG approach at this critical juncture in Cameroon's political history.

GARVEY